

THE PIGEON EGG BEAD

By the "Engages"

Beads are a popular subject for discussion and here at the museum we observe three viewpoints for studying them. The archaeologist sees beads as artifacts which may have diagnostic value and which must be classified according to shape, size, color and method of manufacture. The hobbyist sees them as beautiful and romantic pieces to collect, and to sell, repeating legends about them and, in some instances, creating new legends and fanciful names that manufacturers, traders and Indians never thought of.

The fur trade scholar sees beads as an important article of commerce and the museum curator wants to show the public authentic specimens identified with the names given by the traders who bought and sold them.

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The Museum Of The Fur Trade

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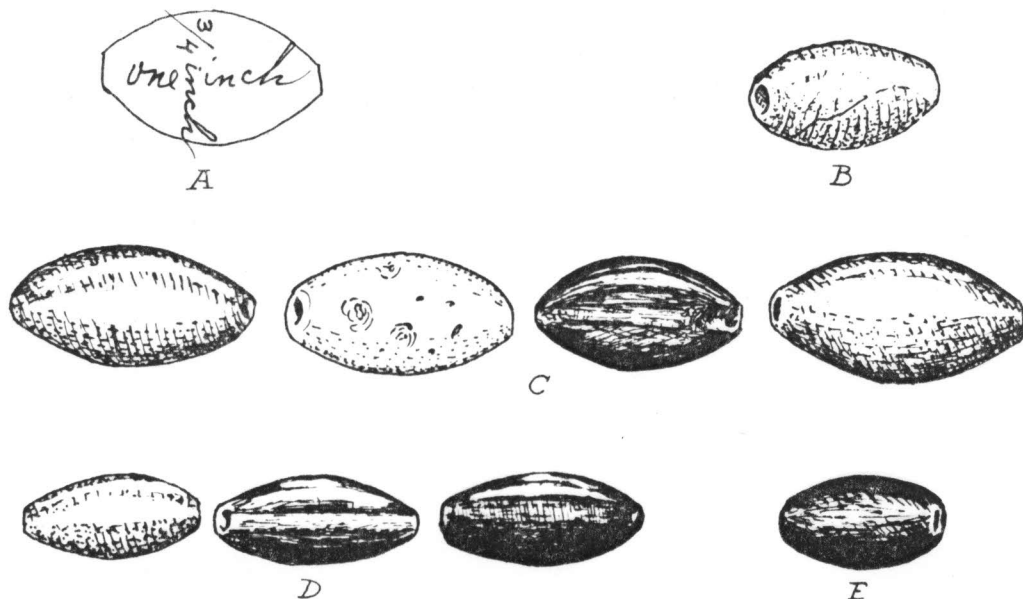
Quarterly

Volume 20, No. 4

ISSN 0027-4135

Winter 1984

pp. 11-14



Beads in the Museum of the Fur Trade Collection, all natural size. A. Drawing of Pigeon Egg Bead sent to Venice by the American Fur Co. in 1831. B. Oval milk glass bead from Virginia, 17th century. C. Four beads from Shoshone burial near Fort Bridger. Left to right: red with yellow center, white, transparent blue, robin's-egg blue. D. Three later 19th century pigeon-egg beads from the James Moore Trading Post at Ft. Washakie, Wyoming. Left to right: red with yellow center, transparent green, transparent blue. E. Dark blue bead picked up on Wounded Knee Battlefield, 1890.

This isn't easy but fur company orders are a good place to start. In those orders beads are divided into relatively few basic categories. The positive identification of those categories can only be made by a careful study of correspondence accompanying the orders, the casual comments made by contemporary observers, and the correlation of archaeological and documentary evidence at known fur trade sites.

In discussing trade beads the "pigeon egg" bead seems a good place to start. We have a good sketch of this type, with dimensions, that was made by a fur trader in 1831. So far no one has made up any fancy 20th century name for it and no one has devised any romantic legends about some special reverence Indians might have held for it. It is just a large glass neckbead, shaped like a tiny football and sold in half a dozen colors, that was popular in the 19th century Indian trade.

Eighteenth century traders seemed to show preference for round beads when large neck beads were wanted. However, some of the early 17th century milkglass beads were of the pigeon egg shape (see illustration).

On September 19, 1831 the American Fur Company wrote Alessandro Bertolla of Venice to order: "150 lbs. chalk white Pigeon egg beads each full 1 inch long and full $\frac{3}{4}$ inch diameter at the thickest part: oblate spheroid shape, similar to the drawing herewith." A similar order for 75 pounds of the same bead was sent to Geisse & Korckhaus of Philadelphia on September 20, 1831. Both orders were apparently for Bernard Pratte of Pratte & Chouteau, St. Louis.¹

In a proposal to the Indian Department, December 14, 1839 Geisse & Korckhaus quoted "chalk white pigeons egg beads" at 90¢ per pound.²

Pigeon eggs were apparently popular on the Upper Missouri. White ones appeared on the Fort Union Inventories in 1831 and blue ones in 1832.³ American Fur Company orders for them continued, in 1833, 75 pounds of white ones were ordered from Geisse & Korkhaus.⁴ In December 1840, Pierre Chouteau Jr. & Co. wrote the company in New York: "The white pigeon Eggs we truly hope may be here before the departure of the Steam Boat for the Yellow Stone...the *Blue* will not answer our purpose at all."⁵ So much for the popular present-day myth that all beads going up the Missouri had to be blue.

Records of the Missouri River trade carried references to pigeon egg beads until a very late period. Fort Clark had 4 lbs. of them on hand July 18, 1839.⁶ Fort Pierre wrote to St. Louis in 1850 asking for white "Pigeon Egg Beads" which hadn't been sent.⁷ The 1850 inventory at Fort Benton included "15 lbs. Red Pigeon Egg Beads" at 75¢ a pound and the same record at Fort Union listed "36½ lbs. Blue Pigeon Egg Beads" at 60¢ plus 137 lbs. of white and 27 lbs. of red at 75¢.⁸

In 1868 the Peace Commission to the Sioux bought 25 lbs. of white pigeon eggs and 25 lbs. of blue from Poultney & Trimble of Baltimore.⁹

A survey of Hudson's Bay Company indents from York Fort in the mid-19th century shows the pigeon egg to have also been a popular item in Canada: 270 bunches in blue, white and coral in 1856, 40 bunches in blue and coral in 1858, others in blue, coral and white in 1863.¹⁰

Some hint of their declining popularity is gained from the narrative of the Earl of Southesk describing his trip across Canada in 1859. Near Ft. Carlton on the Saskatchewan plains he decided to reward the Indian women who accompanied his party:

These Indian women had been most serviceable to us in making clothes; so, when adding a small present to the mere payment for their work, I was glad to find among my stores a parcel of beads exactly to their taste. It amused me to see that fashion reigned here as imperiously as in more civilised lands; some fine, richly-coloured, oval beads, the size of pigeon's eggs, which I considered my best, and which a year or two before would have been generally admired, were despised and out of date, while the little trashy white ones, no bigger than a pin's head, were highly appreciated. Perhaps the small beads were valued as useful for embroidery, in which the Indian and half-breed women excel; while the larger ones, only serving for necklaces and ornaments, had come to be thought too barbaric by those who lived at the Forts.¹¹

The pigeon eggs of early reservation days seem to have been somewhat smaller than those of old fur trade days. Four good examples are shown in the accompanying drawing. Three of them are from the last stock of trader James K. Moore on the Shoshoni Reservation in Wyoming. The fourth example was found on the Wounded Knee Battlefield of 1890.

NOTES

1. *American Fur Company Papers*. Orders Outward, Vol. II. New York Historical Society. N.Y.

2. *Indian Department Miscellaneous Records*. Misc. Box 371, 1839 (2). National Archives, Washington, D.C.

3. Erwin N. Thompson, *Fort Union Trading Post, Historic Structures Report*. Washington, D.C., 1968. 139.

4. *American Fur Company Papers*, loc. cit.

5. *American Fur Company Papers*, Letters Inward. New York Historical Society. N.Y.
6. *Chouteau — Papin Collection*. Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
7. *Fort Pierre Letter Books*. Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
8. *Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana Volume Ten*. Helena, 1940. 201, 210.
9. *Disbursements for Indian Peace Commission*. General Accounting Office, Washington, D.C.
10. *Hudson Bay Company Records*, Reel 380. Manitoba Provincial Archives, Winnipeg.
11. The Earl of Southesk, *Saskatchewan and the Rocky Mountains*. Edinburgh, 1875. (Reprint Rutland, Vt. 1969). 124.

PENNSYLVANIA TRADE GOODS 1683-1685

Source Material

Editors Note — *This list of goods traded the Indians by William Penn's agents for lands west of the Delaware River in 1685 gives a good picture of trade goods at the time (Pennsylvania Archives, Vol. 1, Philadelphia 1852. page 95).*

Twenty Gunns, Twenty fathom Matchcoat [woolen cloak material], twenty Fathom Stroudwaters [woolen trade cloth], twenty Blankets, twenty Kettles, twenty pounds Powder, One hundred Barrs Lead, forty Tomahawks, One hundred Knives, Forty pare Stocking, One Barrel of Beer, twenty pound red Lead [paint powder], One hundred Fathom Wampum, thirty Glass Bottles, thirty Pewter Spoons, one hundred Aul Blades, three hundred tobacco Pipes, One hundred hands of Tobacco, twenty Tobacco Tongs, twenty Steels [fire-steels], three hundred flints, thirty pare Sissers, thirty Combs, Sixty Looking Glasses, two hundred Needles, one Skiple Salt, thirty pounds Shuger, five gallons Mollassis, twenty Tobacco Boxes, One hundred Juise Harps, twenty Hows [hoes], thirty Guimlets [boring tools], thirty Wooden Screw Borers & One hundred Strings Beeds.

A similar land purchase in 1683 included some different items (page 66):

150 fathom of Wampum, 15 Gunns, 15 Blanketts, 3 great Kettles, 15 Small Kettles, 15 Coats, 15 Shirts, 60 yds. Duffills, 30 yds. Stroud watrs [woolen cloth], 6 drawing knives, 20 Gimbletts, 7 pr. of Shoes, 15 pr. Stockins, 15 pr. Sissers, 15 Combes, 15 Axes, 15 Knives, 15 Tobacco Tongs, 30 Barrs of Lead, 31 Pound of Powder, 15 Awles, 18 small glasses [burning glasses], 10 Boxes, 6 Capps, 3 papers of Beads, A paper of Read [red] Lead.



Penn wampum belt